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The prospective director before Congress last year: trying for a new relationship

Casey's Well-Groomed Successor

A New CIA Chief Robert Gates must restore the agency's image

The frail old man sat in a wheelchair, his emaciated right arm hanging limply in his lap, his eyes staring vacantly overhead. His lip was curled, as if he had lost control of his facial muscles, and his bald pate bore the green marks that are used for radiation treatments. As a nurse guided his wheelchair out of a hospital elevator, only the presence of an escort with an official-looking radio suggested that this was a special patient: William Casey, until last week the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Casey's resignation followed increasingly widespread rumors in Washington about his debilitated condition. When the CIA Director was hospitalized in December and underwent surgery for the removal of a malignant brain tumor, President Reagan at first refused to discuss replacing him, believing it would slow Casey's recovery. CIA spokesmen insisted their boss was "reading and absorbing" reports and taking telephone calls, but others who saw Casey were skeptical that he could take telephone calls from anyone. Indeed, Administration sources confirm that the President's aides have communicated with the Director principally through CIA officials and his wife Sophia, who actually signed Casey's letter of resignation.

Thus, it came as no surprise when the White House finally announced that Casey, 73, would step down from the post he had held since 1981. To smooth the departure, he was designated a special coun-

selor to the President. Reagan's 1980 campaign manager and close friend will assume the new duties when he feels well enough to do so.

The desire for a smooth transition also seemed to be a factor in choosing the new Director of Central Intelligence: Robert Gates, a 20-year CIA veteran and Casey protégé who has been running the agency since Casey was hospitalized. Gates, who at 43 is the youngest Director ever named, is expected to help restore the CIA's public image and repair its damaged relations with Congress. Says former CIA Director Richard Helms: "They wanted a pro, and Bob's a pro."

Gates has a doctorate in Russian and Soviet history and in the 1970s spent nearly six years on loan to the National Security Council staff, where he worked for Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski. A career analyst, Gates had no experience in CIA intelligence-gathering operations until he became Casey's deputy in April. Although his demeanor is mild, Gates once wrote a blistering critique of the CIA's ill-focused analytical process, and in 1981 Casey picked him to sharpen the agency's information-reporting procedures. The results helped to restore the CIA's reputation after a succession of intelligence failures during the Carter Administration. Today, says State Department Deputy Secretary John Whitehead, "the agency is amazing. I can ask for an arcane report in the evening, and it will be on my desk in the morning."

Gates' closeness to Casey has prompted speculation about his role in the Iran-*contra* scandal. The Senate Intelligence Committee has noted that Gates was aware of the possibility of illegal diversion of Iran-arms profits to the Nicaraguan *contras* last October, more than a month before Attorney General Edwin Meese discovered the scheme and reported it to the President. When Gates heard of the diversion from a CIA desk officer, the Intelligence Committee reported, he and Casey did nothing more than ask National Security Council Aide Oliver North if their agency was involved. After North assured them the CIA was "completely clean," neither Casey nor Gates took any official action.

Although Gates will undoubtedly be questioned closely about Iranscam during confirmation hearings before the Senate Intelligence Committee next week, Committee Chairman David Boren says the session will not serve "as an inquisition on the Iran affair." Says Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont: "People up here are willing to give [Gates] the benefit of the doubt. He's going to give members of Congress a comfortable rather than confrontational feeling."

This will be in sharp contrast to Casey, who resented having to testify on Capitol Hill and was notorious for his mumblings and evasions. An unpublished Intelligence Committee draft on Iran found that Casey was "less than candid" in his testimony just before his hospitalization. Casey's penchant for hiding clandestine operations also led to clashes with Congress. The 1984 mining of Nicaraguan harbors, for instance, was a foreign relations disaster that spurred the legislators to cut off aid to the *contras*.

While Iran threatens to remain a blot on Casey's record, many in Washington agree that the former Director revived an agency demoralized by budget cuts and scandal. His clout with the President helped to triple the CIA budget and elevate the Director of Central Intelligence to Cabinet rank. As Director, Casey also achieved greater cooperation than ever before among the nation's eleven intelligence organizations.

But Casey's aggressive style and zeal for clandestine operations could prove to be the undoing of everything he achieved if the agency is once more battered by multiple investigations. As the CIA's ailing chief struggles to recover his health at Georgetown University Hospital, colleagues hope his well-groomed successor can protect and consolidate his legacy.

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